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The Accidental Library Tourist

by **Carolee Harrison**
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Several people have told me after a book repair class that they can tell how much I care for books by the way I hold them. I'd never noticed it until then. When I pick up a book, I hold it firmly so the case stays square with the text block. When I open one, I don't let one cover dangle unsupported. It's a habit that unconsciously reveals how much time I've spent handling books.

My regular job is to sit at a workbench and repair library books. My range of movement is between my table, the board shear, and the book press; if someone were to come in and supply me with regular water and glue refills I would hardly need to leave my seat. Worn-out books are brought to me by the box load from the circulating collection, which is housed in another building. On a normal day, I might interact with books more frequently than with people.

I always expected to stay deep in the hidden workshop of Technical Services as a career, so emerging to teach book repair classes changed my view of my work. At first I feared public speaking, but at the risk of sounding like an evangelist who's heard "the call," I couldn't fight the urge to stand up before Oregon's library workers and spread the good word about repair techniques that were both simple to do and based on concepts of book conservation. I

could sense it like a haunting: there were too many books out there being mended with double-stitch binder tape and unstable adhesives. I had a mental picture of myself clad in an apron like the Iron Chef of conservation, a somewhat different image than I probably presented to the first workshop.

Before speaking the first time, I was so nervous that I dressed up for the OLA conference in lipstick and a new blouse as though I was anchoring the evening news, then nearly dropped a glue-laden brush in my lap during the demonstration. I quickly figured out that doing even simple things in front of an audience is suddenly like dancing backwards in high heels—I had to learn moves I'd been doing for years all over again.

I've lost count of how many classes Kris Kern and I have given over the past five years. It's a bit easier to think in terms of where we have been. From our home base at Portland State University, we've traveled as far as Baker City, La Grande, and Bend; northwards to Kent, Washington; westwards to Lincoln City and Newport; and closer in to Hood River, Eugene and Newberg. Travel for these classes is the bulk of my tourism experience in my new home state. Not to dwell on how much of a homebody I've been, but without the opportunity to travel that the OLA/SSD workshops gave me, I might still be quite mistaken about Oregon's size and diversity, wrongly assuming that the entire state is a rainforest and that the I-5 corridor is "Central Oregon." Thanks to our many book mending tours, I've stood in the wind where the open sea rolls in to meet the land's end, looked out over miles of sagebrush and seen the wagon-wheel ruts that defined the Oregon Trail, seen the Three Sisters half-shrouded in a billow of clouds, watched the moon rise over a desert oasis and the sunset reaching golden rays down into the Columbia gorge—and enjoyed such warm hospitality that I often felt as though I could be on vacation.

Taking the mending lab on the road involves a full day of packing that reminds



me of the way my mother would prepare our family of four for a week-long camping trip. The idea, now as then, is to make do with only as much as you can carry, but to “rough it” as little as possible by packing to the point of bursting. When the final box is taped and ready to be loaded into the car, my usual announcement is, “The caravan is packed.” Fortunately Kris drives a late-model Jetta with an ingenious bottomless trunk, capable of swallowing at least five large boxes packed to immobilizing weight with library books, bookbinding tools, jars of PVA, and the necessary burden of bricks to weight the finished repair jobs while the glue dries. The trips I’ve taken in my own car have been more precarious. The Mazda’s back end sagged as I chugged through the mountains and a thick, wet fog on a harrowing night drive home from Redmond. I wondered whether I or the library books would be missed first if I didn’t make it back.

Likening our conservation caravan to a carnival or road show appeals to my pagan heart, inspiring a few escapist fantasies of pulling up my loose Portland roots and mending books out of a van or a tent. I could convince myself that it’s not an unrealistic business idea—after all, everyone has at least one book in their life that is falling apart, a book they wish they could pass on to their children, give to a friend, or just read again themselves, if only it wasn’t threatening to disintegrate. “Books are organic material,” as Kris reminds us during the workshops, and even books that don’t receive the rough treatment that library books endure eventually decay on the shelf, where they’re exposed to inadvertent damage from light, heat, and humidity. Most people have one book that needs fixing, and libraries have many; I daydream of being the one to swoop into town, save the day and drive off with flying colors.

On our first trip through Pendleton, Kris and I stopped at Como’s Pizza for lunch. The restaurant owner herself came out to take our order and we fell into conversation about the snapshots from her Parisian vaca-

tion that were stapled to the wall. Eventually she asked us what brought us into town. “We’re teaching book repair in Baker City,” we said. At the words book repair she took a new interest in us. “Hold on a minute. I need to ask my husband something.”

In five minutes she returned with a loved book from the early 20th century, a baseball almanac with black-and-white pictures and paper the color of weak tea. The cloth spine hung loose and frayed. She opened the book to show me how three generations of her family’s men and boys had signed the back end sheet in lead pencil. “Can you fix this?” she asked. Within minutes she had packed her heirloom into a clean pizza box for me, a complete stranger five minutes before, to take away and repair. I suddenly felt like I could make a living if I just wore a sign reading BOOKS REPAIRED and walked down the main street.

Besides inspiring the occasional fantasy of going “on tour,” teaching book repair around the state has also taught me a lot about the scope of library work in the world outside of my downtown Portland unit. Meeting women and men who individually make up one-fifth or more of their library’s paid staff and are responsible for everything from answering reference calls to taping on dust jacket covers was a reality check, alerting me to the need for economy and durability in repair processes as well as to my own relative insulation in academia. Despite our institutions’ varied clientele, patterns of usage, and distribution of labor, we all had the love of books and the drive to promote reading and information in common, as well as the necessity of operating on a shoestring. Using cloth, PVA glue, archival tape and other materials to repair books came as a revelation for some. A traveling salesperson might also make a living touring libraries and offering fabric, paper and adhesives; one librarian took out a dollar and wanted to buy my “pick-up” cleaning eraser on the spot!

The workshops held revelations for
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an employee evaluation, my self evaluation, and a reminder to send out an agenda for the ILL meeting. I go to shut down my computer and realize I never finished reviewing the e-mails for our courtesy renewal messages, which will have to wait for another day.

As I reflect on the day, I think about how exciting it is to work on a vibrant, thriving campus. I consider how fortunate I am to have such competent colleagues in the faculty and staff at OSU and around the state. I think about the challenges ahead and am thankful that my work is never boring.

Mostly, I think about what should be on my list for the next day and remember the old adage—time flies when you're having fun.


About the Author

Lisa Conaster is currently the Interlibrary Loan/Document Delivery Supervisor at Oregon State University Valley Library. She received her Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. She has served libraries in Oregon, Florida, and Arkansas, and asserts that few endeavors are more rewarding than a day in the life at the library. 

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me, too. I saw books the likes of which I'd never seen. We had flat picture books with spines frayed backwards like a crooked finger, embrittled law tomes that had burst their bindings, atlases the size of end tables, and innumerable copies of the first volume of Harry Potter, each one split open exactly between pages 42 and 43. Collective agreement would encircle the room about wear and tear on middle-school textbooks, paperback mystery novels and baby books printed on stiff cardboard pages, while I strove to keep up and think fast, applying what had worked for me for years on university hardcovers. Our worktables filled up with books, rolls of cloth, and scrap paper as we began cutting and gluing, and for the first time since working the Circulation desk at the Woodstock branch I tasted the hectic pace that is business as usual for many library staff. Every class was my continuing education on the library's role as a community hub—and how to set up what one woman called a "M*A*S*H unit" for books within a usually crowded and very active multi-use work area.

It's been five-and-a-half years since Kris and I first presented on book repair and collection maintenance at the 2000 OLA conference. Since then we've taught five or six full-day classes each year, April through October, without yet putting the caravan up on blocks. The way the word has spread is a wonderful thing, as experience has convinced me we're offering reliable do-it-yourself remedies—not snake oil! I never knew I had any wanderlust, but now I can't imagine a summer spent entirely at one workbench, without a day on the road. 

About the Author

Carolee Harrison has spent the past seven years mending thousands of volumes in the Portland State University Library's circulating collection. She found herself on the workshop circuit quite by accident after confessing her fantasy of becoming the Iron Chef of books. Since the turn of the century, Carolee and Kris Kern, PSU's preservation librarian, have toured Oregon each spring and summer teaching book repair and conservation to library staff and volunteers.